

THE TELEGRAPH WIRE

COMICS & CONIX

ISSUE 20

FREE!

NEXT MAN



AN INTERVIEW WITH ROGER MCKENZIE AND VINCE ARGONDEZZI

COMICO THE COMIC COMPANY

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COMICO THE COMIC COMPANY



M. WAGER / RIETH '85



editorial by **DIANA SCHUTZ**

This is FIT TO BE TIED, the editorial column that begs for trouble. This issue's bondage logo--Overstreet take note--is brought to you by the twisted pen of artist Tom Reilly, with special thanks from ye editor.

Several months ago, in his column, John Barrett created quite a stir by daring to bring up the somewhat uncomfortable subject of unrealistic publishing schedules and blown deadlines. He complained--and rightly so--about the effect this has on the retailer in terms of budgeting, cash flow, and sales projections. He pointed out that the independent publishers are particularly guilty of succumbing to the Dreaded Deadline Doom, while at the same time noting that even Marvel and DC aren't completely blameless in this regard either. This prompted a flurry of phone calls from publishers who were quick to point the accusing finger in any direction other than their own doorstep. Perhaps if we look at the problem a little more closely, we can attempt to come up with some viable solutions.

Delays in the production of a comic will sometimes occur in the printing stage. Last year's union-organized work slowdown at Ronald's in Montreal (where the majority of the industry's Baxter books are printed) is a case in point, resulting in late shipments of a goodly number of titles. This, folks, I liken to an "act of god"--with no forewarning, there is very little a publisher can do in this sort of situation. If not disallowed by contract, the books can perhaps be pulled and sent to another printer, but that results in more complications: publishers tend to have accounts and pay schedules already established with their regular printers, and to set up a quick job with a new printer will usually involve negotiation time and a ready chunk of cash--not to mention that resorting to an untried printer is in itself a risk in terms of the resultant quality of the product.

On the other hand, if one's printer is consistently unreliable, the choice is clear: better to switch than fight!

Sometimes, particularly in the case of the smaller publishers, books are delayed in getting to

the printer in the first place because the publisher simply can't afford to have the books printed on time. Small publishers are just that: small. They don't have the vast financial resources of a Warner Communications or a Cadence Industries to tap into. In response to Barrett's column, a few publishers argued that their cash flow wasn't quite what it should be, due to late payments from distributors. They also claimed that many distributors are especially tardy when it comes to compensating the independents, who can *least* afford the delay, while generally prompt with payments to the so-called "Big Two." Phil Lasorda of Comico notes a definite "lack of cooperation from a certain group of distributors--they know who they are--in terms of paying on time. We've also had problems," he says, "with some distributors who, for whatever reason, just refuse to fill re-orders on our books. Even though late payment from distributors has never prevented Comico from going to press, our lives would be easier if distributors were as committed to the independents as they are to the larger publishers." Distributors, of course, will hasten to counter that they can't pay *anyone*, let alone the independents, if their retail accounts are late on *their* payments. And so on round the circle. The answer here, obviously, is for *everyone* to order what they can afford and pay when the bills are due. (And if you think that's easy, remember the trouble you have just balancing your own checkbook!)

Prior to the actual printing, some delays may occur at the stage of color separation. If this is a regular problem, again, it's time for the publisher to find a new separator. What is more likely to happen, however, is that the separator will make an occasional mistake on a job--in the case of hand separations, at least, separators are human too! The only way around this is for the publisher to allot sufficient time in the separation stage to allow for

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THE TELEGRAPH WIRE #20, April/May 1985. Published bimonthly by Comics and Comix, Inc. Office of Publication:
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scriptions: \$5.00/six issues. Publisher: John Barrett. Editor: Diana Schutz. Assistant Editor: Wendy Lee.
Cover Logo: Tom Brezichowski. Cover Illustration: Vince Argonuzzi, color courtesy of Comico The Comic Company.
Next Man is TM and (C) 1985 Roger McKenzie and Vince Argonuzzi. Printed at Western Offset in San Diego. All
information contained herein is accurate to the best of our knowledge. This issue is for Ron and Ken, who got
me started in this crazy business in the first place!
..... 3

the possibility of mistakes and, consequently, the time required for corrections to be made.

This isn't as simple as it sounds. To allot extra time for separations is only possible if a book's creative team sticks to its deadlines.

"My overwhelming concern," explains Renegade Press publisher Deni Loubert, "is to try and fit a schedule to an artist's sensibility about his book. Some artists need more time to do a page than others. And then sometimes you have a project you want to do to increase your readership, but that takes time away from the regular book. Deadlines are always a matter of priority and different books have different priorities."

Going back along the production process, the publisher is dealing with a colorist, an inker, a letterer, a penciller, and a writer. Though a single individual may be responsible for more than one of these tasks, in general there is usually some form of assembly line operating here and delays may occur anywhere along that line.

What can a publisher do when a creator fails to live up to his/her deadline? In the case of work-made-for-hire books, the answer is easy: reprint or inventory fill-in issues will ease the situation and, though they create special problems of their own, at least the book gets out on schedule. Furthermore, in a work-made-for-hire situation, any member of the creative team who is consistently late can be replaced--though not always easily, especially in the case of the writer or the artist.

The problem really gets thorny in the case of creator-owned material--which is why the independents in particular face a certain difficulty in maintaining schedules. Reprints are out of the question, since most of the creator-owned books don't have enough of a backlog yet to make it feasible to reprint an issue. Inventory issues are a possibility, assuming the creator agrees to this, but this solution presents certain legal complications in the form of royalty payments and so on. Still, assuming that the legal tangles can be straightened out--which is a large assumption--and that the creator is in agreement, inventory issues are one possible solution.

Independent publishers are hardly thrilled about delayed books. Without necessarily wanting to sacrifice quality, they're still hip to the fact that books that fail to be released on time represent a significant loss in sales (and company integrity!) and, consequently, less money all around. According to Kim Thompson of Fantagraphics Books, "If the book is a successful one, the creators pretty much have the publisher over a barrel. And, I might add, after 50 years of being screwed, I think they're owed that at least!" He goes on to point out that "we're clearly seeing a shift in power from the publisher to the creator, and budget and schedule problems tend to accompany that. I suspect we're all going to wind up with a couple of HEAVEN'S GATES on our hands--but, in the long run, it will be worth it."

In the meantime, however, what protection--if any--does a publisher of creator-owned books have when the creator is late?

Let's assume that, for whatever reasons, there is no inventory issue at hand ready to be slotted in to the gap--or maybe there is one, but it would destroy continuity. Perhaps there is a clause in the creator's contract specifying some reduction of royalties on a late book. But so what? That's only after-the-fact compensation for the publisher and doesn't in any way guarantee that the book will be done on schedule. A publisher cannot magically produce a book that s/he neither owns nor has in hand, nor can a publisher hover over a creative team 24

hours a day, forcing the writer to write and the artist to draw.

In the case of perennial offenders, the publisher has the option of dropping the title altogether. However, although this last-ditch measure has been taken in some instances, it's not a *solution* to the problem--it's merely the *removal* of that problem in the particular case and, ultimately, benefits nobody.

Eclipse editor-in-chief Cal Yarrowe has a somewhat novel approach to the problem of missed deadlines. "Over the last year," she says, "we've been trying to get creators to take more responsibility for the trafficking of their own books. Because the printer needs final film for eight books at one time, I recently sent around a memo to all creators which showed them how the lateness of their book would work to reduce the income of the creators responsible for the other seven books on their shipping schedule. The results have been overwhelmingly positive and I believe this mutual aid approach will work where a system of threats and punishments has not."

As the saying goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, and the publisher should, of course, have a *realistic* schedule to begin with. And that means *not* scheduling a book until, say, three issues of the title in question have already been completed. It simply doesn't pay to be so gun-ho about some newly-acquired property that the gun is jumped on setting a release date--with the unfortunate result that the book's very *first* issue doesn't even make it on time! Furthermore, having three issues "in the drawer" allows a creator to blow the occasional deadline without affecting the book's release schedule. Those three issues function as a safeguard.

Having those three issues in advance, mind you, means paying out goodly sums to the creators at least *six months* before the publisher is likely to see a return on his/her investment--which isn't necessarily feasible in some cases.

It's worth pointing out, however, that the three-issue safeguard isn't entirely foolproof either. Even in the case of a non-creator-owned book like CAMELOT 3000, and even with Big Daddy Warnerbucks in DC's wallet, there was still one full year between CAMELOT #11 and #12.

In other words, assuming the publishers do their job, the problem shifts back to the creator. And since the problem is far more prevalent among the independents, it seems obvious that, as with some distributors, some creators also give short shrift to the smaller publishers. There have, in fact, been cases in which a creator-owned book is late because that creator is busy doing a few quick jobs for one of the Big Two!

Now why would a creator jeopardize his/her own book in order to fill in at a major company? Money, perhaps. Status, certainly. And who is it that fosters these larger publishers with major league status? Ultimately, the bottom line is *you*, the consumer. I've said it before and I'll say it again: The independents, and the comics industry in general, need *your* support in order to grow.

And maybe then we can have our comics good and have them Tuesday!

With this issue, the TELEGRAPH WIRE welcomes Wendi Lee on board as assistant editor. Some of you may already be familiar with Wendi's work: she wrote the much-heralded "Steel, Stealth, and Magic" for ECLIPSE MONTHLY #9. In her capacity as assistant editor, Wendi will be taking some of the load off my shoulders. Among other things, like writing various

articles and dealing with the WIRE's advertisers, Wendi will also be taking care of subscriptions from here on in. Although the WIRE's editorial address remains the same here in still chilly New York, should you wish to subscribe or re-subscribe, remember to send \$5.00 (for a one-year subscription) to: THE TELEGRAPH WIRE, 405 California Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94306. You can also call Wendi and wish her your welcome at 415-326-8377.

Eccentric Evolutions

Due to the relocation and expansion of our Palo Alto store, the expansion of our Citrus Heights store, and the re-modelling of our Berkeley store (whew!), publisher John Barrett has had his hands pretty full lately. Rest assured that John's column will definitely reappear next issue. In the meantime, he's asked me to extend special thanks on his behalf to Russ and Doris Ernst of Glenwood Distributors for having invited him to their annual trade show, held in Las Vegas this past January. In John's own words, "This is an excellent forum for publishers and retailers, and exactly the type of service distributors should provide."

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MAIN LINES

Due to the rather truncated nature of this issue's news column, conscientious readers are heartily advised not to blink!

In April, Deni Loubert of Renegade Press is moving her company's base of operations from Kitchener, Ontario to Los Angeles, California. As yet another Canadian forfeits her country for the land of junk food and drive-in movies, we at the WIRE wish Deni all the best with her move to warmer climes!

GENE DAY'S BLACK ZEPPELIN, a 24-page bimonthly title featuring previously unpublished Gene Day material, is the first new series to come out of the recently-formed Renegade Press. Co-edited by Gale Day and Joe Erslavis, the book will center on short fantasy, SF, and horror stories and is due to ship in April.

The third issue of TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES is also shipping in April, quickly followed by the first in a number of one-issue micro-series from Mirage Studios. RAPHAEL, TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLE #1 ships in May, FUJITOID #1 ships in September, and MICHAELANGELO, TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLE #1 ships in December. Who says you can't get enough of a good thing???

The nationally syndicated RDBD-TECH TV series, produced by Carl Macek of Harmony Gold, has already begun airing in several markets. The show presents, for the first time ever, English-language translations of three popular Japanese animated series, *Macross*, *Hospeada*, and *Southern Cross*. In conjunction with Harmony Gold, Comico The Comic Company is producing comic book adaptations of the RDBD-TECH show. RDBDTECH MASTERS (*Southern Cross*) and RDBDTECH: THE NEW GENERATION (*Hospeada*) are both set to debut in July. RDBDTECH: THE MACROSS SAGA #2 is due in April, continuing the story already begun in Comico's MACROSS #1, released late last year. RDBDTECH: THE MACROSS SAGA #3 ships in May and—unabashed plug—marks the first issue of the series to be edited by yours truly!

In other Comico news, after being briefly placed on a temporary hiatus, ELEMENTALS #A is now set



(C) Mirage Studios



Splash page of NEW MUTANTS #32, by artist Steve Leialoha

(C) Marvel Comics Group

two-issue micro-series. JOHN BOLTON: HALLS OF HORROR will reprint material which ran previously in obscure British magazines. The first issue is scheduled for release in June.

First Comics plans to publish a deluxe edition of Nicola Cuti and Joe Staton's original E-MAN series. The first First issue of the seven-part series is due in June. The month of June, and not April as previously advertised, also marks the release of HARD TIMES, the AMERICAN FLAGG! graphic novel. And Tim Truman's TIME BEAVERS, a 52-page graphic novel, is scheduled to ship in May, marking Truman's first effort as writer and artist on the same project.

In more graphic novel news, Marvel is releasing THE ALAODIN EFFECT in May. Plotted by Jim Shooter, written by David Michelinie, with pencils by Greg LaRocque and inks by Vince Colletta, THE ALAODIN EFFECT features four Marvel-ous females: Storm of the X-MEN, the Wasp from THE AVENGERS, She-Hulk (currently a member of the FF), and Tigra of THE WEST COAST AVENGERS.

And here's a scoop to whet the appetites of all X-Fanatics: A benefit issue of THE X-MEN is currently in the planning stages, according to mutant-writer Chris Claremont. All proceeds will go to ease the starvation problem in Ethiopia. While a comprehensive list of writers and artists involved in the project has not yet been finalized, the book will be a jam session, plotted by Claremont, with several high-profile industry talents contributing their energies to the project. Stay tuned for details.



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for release in June of this year.

For those who take their super-heroes seriously, this summer will herald the premier Eclipse publication of Alan Moore's "Marvelman." Printed on high-grade newsprint, each issue will sell for 75¢. Not to be missed!

Dave Stevens fans should keep an eye open for his cover art on several Eclipse titles, beginning this summer with CROSSFIRE #12, ONAGENTS #24, and MR. MONSTER #2.

(Hey! Wouldn't it be great to see a Mr. Monster/Swamp Thing team-up written by Alan Moore? Just a thought.)

In addition to the Paul Gulacy NIGHTMARES micro-series and the McGregor/Rogers DETECTIVES, INC. micro-series, both due this spring, Eclipse plans to publish yet another



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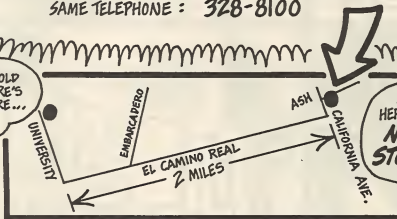
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Before anything else, I would like to thank the previously uncredited Mike Mignola for whipping up the snazzy logo perched atop this column. I've thanked him in person, but since no name was ever attached to it, I felt he deserved a public notice.

I would comment on Mike's current ROCKET RACCOON comic, but as I write this, the first issue just came out and I haven't yet had a chance to read it. But it looks interesting, to say the least, despite the fact that it was printed with that dreadfully new Flexographic press that DC and Marvel are trying to foist off on us. Frankly, I think this Flexographic process is hideous. The blacks aren't black, the colors are spotty and off-register, and any suggestion of subtlety or nuance is utterly nullified. The hype flowing from the boys in DC's production department would have us believe that the Flexographic process, courtesy of Spartan Printing, will ultimately lead to better printed comics—once all the bugs are worked out, that is. I find this a little hard to swallow, rather akin to trying to swallow a watermelon. And even if this proves to be true, must we be subjected to a whole slew of badly printed comics in the interim? Should we, the readers, be the victims and guinea pigs during this period of technical experimentation? And if they're going to experiment on actual comics, why don't they do it on titles like ARAK and DAZZLER instead of books like SWAMP THING ANNUAL #2? And, finally, what's the point, when companies like First and Eclipse, and Marvel and DC themselves, already have various proven methods of producing very nice looking comic books?

WHAT A BORING WEB WE WEAVE: As I've written elsewhere, it was the Batman TV show of 1966 that got me to notice comic books, and it was SPIDER-MAN #45 that turned me into a four-color junkie and a certified comic book addict. In fact, seeing those old covers in the OFFICIAL MARVEL INDEX to the AMAZING SPIDER-MAN #2 really gave rise to some serious pangs of nostalgia.

The truth of the matter is, for the better part of Spider-Man's existence (I refuse to call him "Spidey"), he's been drawn by inspired talents and consummate professionals. Steve Ditko, of course, set the mood and pace that continue to be felt today, and despite the very different style of John Romita Sr. which immediately followed, his was a very entertaining and professional rendition as well. Following Ditko and Romita, artists like Gil Kane, John Byrne, Mike Zeck, Jim Starlin, and Frank Miller all turned in solid versions of the web-slinger. In recent years, however, we've seen the quality slip, as less inspired individuals handled the book. I don't wish to name any names, but the point is, titles like MARVEL TEAM-

UP and PETER PARKER, THE SPECTACULAR SPIDER-MAN have been, for the most part, extremely mediocre books, very much products of the Marvel hackwork assembly line. Certain individual issues were above par, but with increasing frequency, readers were subjected to newer and sillier villains and stultifyingly boring artwork. Even the AMAZING SPIDER-MAN suffered a prolonged period of unreadable issues.

Since the so-called revamping of THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN, written by Tom DeFalco, and drawn by Ron Frenz and Joe Rubinstein, the title is suddenly worth reading again, and genuinely entertaining and compelling in the classic Marvel tradition. At the same time, we get dull and puerile fill-in issues like #262 and #264. SPIDER-MAN #264, in fact, was beyond purchase. I'm not a completist in the sense that I feel somehow lost without knowing I have every issue in a given series, even the unreadable ones, such as SPIDER-MAN #264. First, the art was no better than embryonic fan art, and second, the story simply looked too silly for words. Issues such as these really make me wonder.

Even worse is the new WEB OF SPIDER-MAN. I foolishly expected this new title to be something to look forward to. Supposedly, WEB OF SPIDER-MAN was replacing the cancelled MARVEL TEAM-UP because Marvel felt they'd done all they could with the team-up concept. WEB OF SPIDER-MAN was going to be a breath of fresh air. Quite the contrary. The stories in the first two issues were exceedingly juvenile, and the art was pure hack. They seemed aimed not at the tried-and-true Spider-Man fans, but at the same audience which read SPIDEY SUPER-STORIES. I really couldn't believe it. The only good thing I can say about the new book is that the first issue had a perfectly splendid cover by Charles Vess, a cover which only demonstrates what a truly good artist can do with only Spider-Man.

I fail to understand why SPIDER-MAN is such a dumping ground for impoverished artists. There are so many good artists floating around from title to title, you'd think a few of them could light on SPIDER-MAN once in a while. Imagine Spider-Man by P. Craig Russell, Alex Toth, Russ Heath, Steve Rude, Mike Golden, or Barry Smith, or at least inked by someone of the caliber of Steve Leialoha, or Terry Austin, or Jerry Ordway.

Rumor has it that BERNI WRIGHTSON is working on a Spider-Man graphic novel. I'll believe that when I see it, but whoever is responsible for that particular combination is certainly thinking in the right direction.

Whatever happens (and past experience indicates nothing will), it's high time the powers-that-be start thinking in terms of quality equals sales, and stop expecting fans to buy every issue of a favorite

title as a matter of habit or blind compulsion.
(For further elucidation in this vein, read on...)

Burbey's BELIEVE IT & WEEP: According to an item in THE COMICS JOURNAL #95, VOID INDIGO suffered from low sales, in the 30,000 to 40,000 range. And according to a Statement of Ownership in STEVE CANYON MAGAZINE #7, that title enjoys a print run not exceeding 9000. No comment is necessary regarding the relative value or non-value of either publication, but those of you out there who bought VOID INDIGO and ignored STEVE CANYON MAGAZINE, well, you know who you are. Suffice it to say, the above figures merely illustrate the dismal state of American comics and the rather suspect tastes of too many readers. Buy comics like VOID INDIGO if you want to, but not at the expense of books of genuine, indisputable merit. Not all the choices we comic fans make are ones of choice. Too often we buy books out of habit, out of some compulsion to have every single issue. But if even John Byrne tells you not to buy books you don't like, why don't you listen to him? You've got to let publishers know what you don't want, and if you keep buying the same crap month after month (not to mention multiple copies of same) simply to keep your collections complete, why should they do anything different? They know you're going to buy it just because it has the company name on it, while Kitchen Sink struggles just to keep publishing a few books of quality and substance.

I suspect that too many of you aren't comic fans interested in the medium as a whole or comics as art, but Marvel fans, somehow brainwashed like mere consumers, manipulated into "selecting" the most widely and loudly advertised product.

Tell me I'm wrong all you want, tell me you buy only the books you enjoy and vice versa, but the next time your favorite title features a completely horrendous excuse for a fill-in issue, try something just for the sake of truth, reality, and the un-American way. Try to resist buying it, and then tell me how wrong I am.

See you at the racks.

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Mark Burbey has written about comics and film for such publications as RBCC, CASCADE COMIX MONTHLY, CINEMACABRE, and SWANK, is a contributor to THE COMICS JOURNAL, and wrote THE MARVEL GUIDE TO COLLECTING COMICS. He has also had a number of stories published in DR. WIRTHAM'S COMIX & STORIES.

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Comics & Comix Calendar

Monday, April 1 - Wednesday, April 10

Marathon relocation SALE at our old Palo Alto store, 515 Cowper Street. Incredible savings!

Saturday, April 6

Join TIMESPIRITS artist TOM YEATES for his appearance at our Solano Mall store, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., or at the Citrus Heights location, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.

Saturday, April 13

Final judging of our FANTASY FIGURE PAINTING CONTEST with special guest judge ART NICHOLS at the Sacramento store, 2 p.m.

Sunday, April 14

Another great C&C AUCTION, from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the Irving Street store, San Francisco. Amazing deals!

Thursday, April 18 - Sunday, April 21

Look for the Comics & Comix tables at FUTURE WORLD EXPD, Moscone Center, San Francisco.

Saturday, April 27

Final judging of C&C's MODEL BUILDING CONTEST with special guest judge MIKE PERKINS, model maker extraordinaire, starting at 2 p.m. at the Lombard Street store in San Francisco.

Saturday, May 11

It's the OFFICIAL GRAND OPENING PARTY at our new Palo Alto store, 405 California Avenue. Fun and free gifts for all!

Sunday, May 12 - Monday, May 13

Look for C&C's own TOM WALTON, Director of Public Relations, speaking at the STAR*REACH TRADE SHOW, to be held at the Airport Hyatt in Oakland.

Friday, May 24 - Monday, May 27

BAYCON '85 at the Red Lion Inn in San Jose. Special guests include DAVIO BRIN, MICHAEL WHELAN, CHRIS CLAREMONT, and many many more! Tickets are \$15.00 a day at the door, or \$35.00 for the entire four-day extravaganza.

Saturday, June 8 - Sunday, June 9

CREATION returns to San Francisco for another great convention! For ticket information, contact Comics & Comix.

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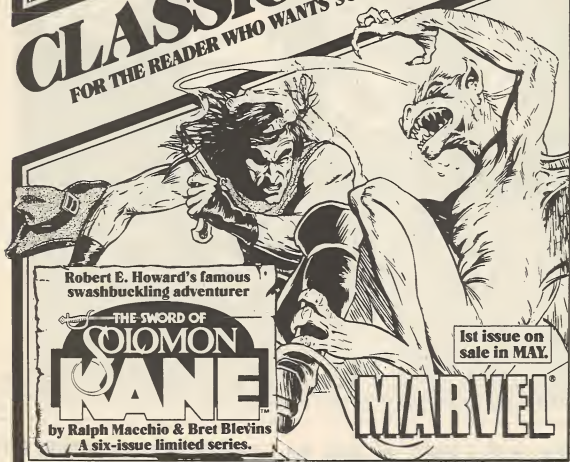
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JOIN GENE, DAVID, & DANNY DAY, DAVE SIM, & CHARLES VESS ON **APRIL 20TH.**

Comico's NEXT MEN:

Roger McKenzie and Vince Argondezzi

By the time this interview sees print, NEXT MAN #1 will have already hit the stands. Created by writer Roger McKenzie and artist Vince Argondezzi, NEXT MAN is the story of David Boyd, a Viet Nam medic who is mortally wounded while in the line of duty and subsequently reconstructed several years later by a technologically advanced secret government agency. Boyd then becomes the "next man," an unwitting vanguard for the agency's new strike force.

Roger McKenzie is hardly new to the comics field. His most recent credits include scripting the much acclaimed SUN-RUNNERS with its delightful "Mike Mahogany" back-up, published initially by Pacific and now by Eclipse Comics. He has also written several Marvel titles, most notably DAREDEVIL with Frank Miller.

On the other hand, NEXT MAN marks Vince Argondezzi's first regular comics series, but the young artist has already begun to display the kind of professionalism required by the field. Heavily influenced by the "King of Comics," Argondezzi brings a definite Kirby-esque flair to the adventures of the Next Man.

This interview took place in December '84 at the Comico offices in Norristown, Pennsylvania. It was transcribed by Eric Yarber, copy-edited by Roger McKenzie and Vince Argondezzi, with final edits by yours truly.

Special thanks are due to Vince and to Gerry Giovinco and Phil Lasorda of Comico for all their help in coordinating the Next Man cover for this issue of THE TELEGRAPH WIRE.

-- Diana Schutz

DIANA SCHUTZ: The first thing I'm interested in is why you chose to bring NEXT MAN to Comico.

ROGER MCKENZIE: Easy. Because nobody else would give us the time of day. No, not really. I had originally approached Pacific with this idea and they said, "Fine, we like it, let's do it." A year and a half went by, and we never did it.

VINCE ARGONDEZZI: At the time, I was just starting to get a little foot into Pacific by doing two or



The cover of NEXT MAN #1, pencilled by Vince Argondezzi, with inks by Bill Anderson

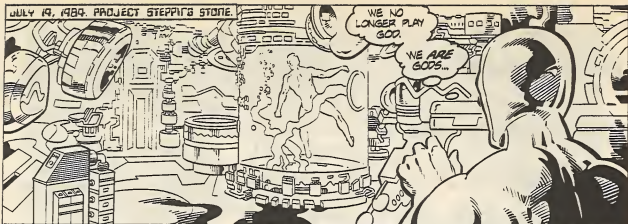
three VANGUARD stories for Dave Scroggy and I sent Roger a sample page for NEXT MAN and he said, "Let's get together and do it."

DIANA: When Pacific suspended operations, why did you move specifically to Comico?

VINCE: We'd talked to other companies, but they were dragging their feet. Comico was there and they really wanted it.

ROGER: And I was ready to go with it, having waited a year and a half already and having had this idea originally back in high school--and we won't even go into how long that's been!

VINCE: I think Comico has the best attitude. They have the smarts to let the creators do what the creators want to do. What seems to be wrong with comics, at least in the mainstream, is that the mainstream companies keep the same feel to all their products. And some of the other alternate publishers are good, but they don't have enough commercial sense. So, on the one hand you've got really crass commercial stuff, and on the other hand you've got nice material with the alternatives, but it's so far out that the companies can't survive because they're too creative.



(C) McKenzie and Argonuzzi

David Boyd undergoes "regeneration"...

Comico's right in the middle. They've got beautiful commercial stuff like ELEMENTALS, they've got really sharp creative stuff like MAGE, and they've got work like NEXT MAN that's kind of in the middle. Plus they're branching out into stuff like MACROSS and all.

DIANA: Okay, tell me a little bit about NEXT MAN.

ROGER: Well, in a nutshell, the premise is this: Our hero was nearly killed in Viet Nam and more or less put on ice for twenty years until they could figure out a way to put him back together and make him whole. They do, for their own reasons. "They" are a mysterious agency which we'll not even see that much of in the first issue. We'll see later on exactly what's going on with them. I don't really want to spill too many beans about what they're up to. Basically, our hero is the "next man" they want to use as the vanguard for a new strike force. We've already written and drawn the first issue. I've written the second, and we haven't explained yet exactly what all of his powers are.

DIANA: But he's essentially a reconstructed human being?

ROGER: Yeah. Genetically reconstructed.

VINCE: He's tough. We're not going to make him invincible, though. That would be ridiculous. Kirby had that problem with the Eternals: they're eternal, they can never be destroyed...

ROGER: What we're trying to do is something like a mainstream superhero strip without some of its typical faults: like the secret identity problems and all that sort of stuff that I've really grown bored with.

DIANA: So, what makes NEXT MAN different from all the other superhero books that are already out on the market?

ROGER: I think what makes it different is the way we're treating the concepts. We haven't yet said, "Here's a superhero." We haven't yet said, "Here's a big bad villain who's out to beat up the superhero for no reason in the world."

VINCE: That comes in issue #3! [Laughter]

ROGER: Yeah!

VINCE: The good thing about NEXT MAN is there's so much potential in the character. Basically you have a guy who does not fit in. He has no real identity. His father's dead. He's alienated.

ROGER: But he's got so much going on that he won't realize it for several issues, although 1980s culture shock will start hitting him soon. But he has

found out more or less what's going on, and he says, "No way will I help you destroy the world." As a matter of fact, he destroys his creators at the end of the first issue, or so he thinks.

DIANA: You said earlier that this is a superhero book without the faults that you see in the mainstream. What's being done with the concept of the superhero in the mainstream that you're trying to avoid?

ROGER: I can tell you one thing that's been stereotyped: The hero works at the "Daily Planet" and he has all these supporting characters that you really don't care about. And then there's the Marvel philosophy: You've got to show this and this and this, or it's not a good story. That's just a lot of bull.

VINCE: When CAPTAIN AMERICA came out, it was like two issues later that he was sleeping at Avengers Mansion, you know what I mean? That's not going to happen. Well, in issue #50 or so, maybe...

ROGER: I don't know if the Next Man will ever sleep at Avengers Mansion! [Laughter]

VINCE: Well, you know what I mean. It's possible that he might hook up with somebody or have cross-overs. But we're not gearing the character specifically for that. That'd be nice, but we're not going to prostitute the character.

ROGER: One thing is that we're not hooked into any sort of universe.

VINCE: That's another good thing about Comico, too. They're not hung up on that stuff.

ROGER: In a way it's nice to have the security of being in the Marvel Universe. If over your book's in trouble, you can pull Spider-Man or the Hulk or whoever and try to pick up some sales. In that respect, it's good. But what I don't like about it is that it limits you creatively, a lot of times, with what you can do. When I was working for Marvel, I had a whole bunch of good stories I couldn't use because twenty years ago, in some issue, somebody stubbed his toe. "Well, he broke his toe, so he can't possibly do this!" You'd have to throw out whole stories after a while.

DIANA: Given that you have these feelings about the mainstream, and given that you are now doing a book for what is in many ways an off-beat publisher, why do a superhero at all?

VINCE: I think reality rears its ugly head once again. To do anything creative, you have to make some sacrifices. There has to be some element of commercialism. You have to have some tie-in to the market that's good enough to stand on its own, good enough that you can

experiment a little. If we can do NEXT MAN, who knows what we could come up with next year?

ROGER: And another answer to your question is that I enjoy doing superheroes. My question to you is: Why not?

DIANA: Only because you have the opportunity to do something different, given your publisher. But if you had your druthers, if commercialism were not a factor, would you do superheroes?

ROGER: I think I'd be perfectly content doing NEXT MAN. I wouldn't mind doing something along the lines of the old Kirby romance comics.

DIANA: Yay!

VINCE: I'd like to do a western.

ROGER: A western? I'd like to do a western.

VINCE: I'd like to do a war book.

ROGER: It's a shame that there are only superhero books in the mainstream, but it's not a shame because the public seems to want superhero books. A lot of times they claim they don't--

VINCE: And then the publishers try something different and they go out of business. You've got to be careful.

ROGER: I think we're doing sort of a compromise. The Next Man is a superhero, but we're trying to do the book a little bit differently. We'll see what happens. We're not trying to explain everything on the first page.

VINCE: Plus we've been talking, and there might be a time when we take him out of his costume. I'd look forward to seeing an issue or two where he goes without his costume.

Say! What do you guys think about Kirby?

ROGER: Yeah, what about the new Kirby?

VINCE: Everybody's calling me the new Kirby. Phil [Lasorda] calls me "Vince the Prince." [laughter]

DIANA: So I gather you're both influenced by Kirby?

ROGER: Oh, absolutely.

VINCE: Structurally. I must make that clear. I think if everybody took off from him structurally, comics would be a lot better off. Everybody just looks at those big muscles *cosmetically* and all those surface things, and they don't bother to look into the dynamics of why it really works. What I've tried to do, and I think I've pulled it off, is to understand why it works. I was influenced by Kirby--you can tell it in my work. I was influenced by Neal

Adams, John Byrne, and a couple of other people here and there. What Kirby's doing now is that he's just going so far out he's losing all contact. And he's not doing what people like, I think. As an artist who puts out product, I think you've got an obligation to put out something that'll make as many people happy as you can. If a lot of people like something, you should draw it. A lot of people happen to like superheroes, so that's why I'm drawing them."

DIANA: Vince, this is your first regular series. How are you dealing with deadlines--

VINCE: The pressure!

DIANA: --and dealing with a writer who lives so far away?

VINCE: Nobody knows this, but Roger and I have a psychic link!

ROGER: It's called the telephone. I think we ran up a bigger bill than our advance!

VINCE: At first I was kind of scared to work with Roger. And deadlines! This is the big time now, I can't screw up. Right now, I've got the first book done and I think I did a decent job on it. I do a lot of advertising work too, so it's just a matter of telling people in Philadelphia that I can't do that stuff anymore. Just as long as you allot your time well. If you take too much work, you'll screw all of it up. That's the big thing: not to get too greedy so that all the work starts coming in and pretty soon you've got everything to do and no time to do it.

ROGER: Trouble with me is that at Marvel it wasn't a matter of greed, it was "Well gee, now I've got a chance to write all these characters I've read for years." It was difficult to say no to an assignment, and all of a sudden you'd find yourself with five or six assignments. Five or six deadlines that all fell on the same Friday. So you'd wind up three or four weeks late, and you'd wind up doing work for somebody else.

DIANA: Roger, you're writing and editing NEXT MAN. How do you feel about the concept of the writer-editor in general? That's not something you were able to do at Marvel.

ROGER: When I was there, it amounted to the same thing. I rarely ever got any editorial guidance at Marvel, which I found detrimental to my career and my learning process. They threw me in cold, you know. I was glad when Archie Goodwin called and said, "Do you want to write some books?" This was



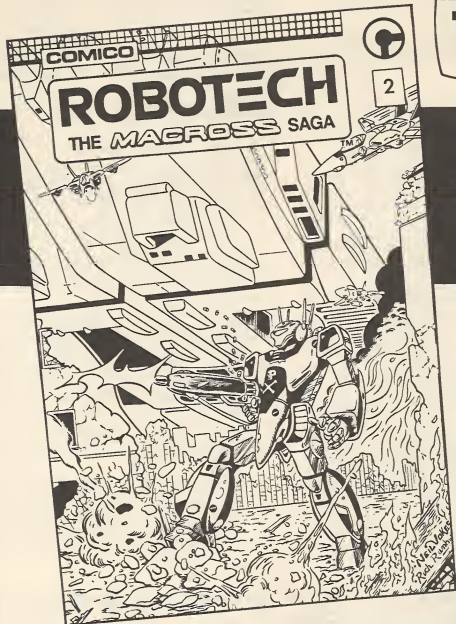
(C) McKenzie and Argondezzi

...and is transformed into the Next Man.

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#2

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DAWN OF A NEW AGE:

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after I'd pestered him unmercifully. And I said, "Sure." He said, "Come on in," and I did and he handed me GHOST RIDER and OAREDEVIL, which Jim Shooter had plotted and the artists had drawn. He said, "Here, these are late. Write them." You go home and you sweat bullets. You go home with the art for GHOST RIDER #29, and #28's already on the stands. This is a classic case of "It doesn't have to be good, it has to be Tuesday." It was Tuesday, and it wasn't good.

DIANA: What about now? Despite the situation at Marvel, do you prefer being your own editor, or do you feel that you would rather have someone over your shoulder?

ROGER: I prefer being my own editor, but at the same time I hope that somebody at Comico, if I start making some big wild changes, will call and say, "Hey, we really don't want the Next Man dressed in ballet tights." I think there ought to be some sort of control.

VINCE: There are always sounding boards, too. When Roger writes a script, I look at it, and then Phil [Lasorda] will see it and Gerry [Giovino] will see it. It would be hard to screw up. But I don't see any problems with Roger. I think he's the best writer in the business.

ROGER: So, I'm listed as editor, but there are about ten or fifteen different editors, really.

VINCE: The guys at Comico see it. They read it. I'm sure they'd say, "Hey Rog, the Next Man in ballerina tights isn't going to work." If something's really outrageous, they'll catch it. It's just a matter of having sounding boards, not really the situation of having an editor. You have editors in the sense of people seeing your work before it gets into full production. That's the best way too, I think.

DIANA: So what is the actual working relationship? Are you doing this full script?

ROGER: Yes, at present. That may change. Who knows? I would have no reluctance at all to work in the so-called "Marvel style." When I started, I turned in the synopsis for the first story--which is like twenty pages--and an outline for the next five adventures. But, usually, by the second or third



Photo courtesy of Comico

VINCE ARGONZEZZI: "Right now, in an alternate universe, we're melting!"

story you can throw the synopses of the other three out the window. We change things. So far, knock on wood, I've gotten through two issues and haven't changed anything, which is amazing.

VINCE: I did 25 pages of thumbnails for the first issue. I paced it, more or less. This issue--the second issue--I think will be all script, although I contributed a couple of things. But you talk about things changing around. Roger got this great idea in the middle of the script: a great character, Cubit, who I think will be one of the great supporting characters in comics. And that's how it works. That's spontaneity.

ROGER: I had to call him and say, "Hey, would you mind redrawing something?"

VINCE: Yeah. Had to erase the whole page! [Laughter]

ROGER: I prefer things working that way. I can sit down and write out six different synopses and figure the story out for the next fourteen years, but do you know how boring those next fourteen years would be?

DIANA: Who do you see your audience as being for NEXT MAN?

ROGER: Anybody that currently reads comic books. Anybody that picks up the X-MEN, anybody that picks up SPIDER-MAN... You mean age groups?

DIANA: Yeah.

ROGER: I can see it running the gamut. I don't see why a younger reader wouldn't like it, why an older reader wouldn't like it too.

VINCE: It's pretty much down the middle. College kids...

ROGER: They can get involved in it, too.

DIANA: Before we end this interview, do you have any other comments you'd like to make about NEXT MAN, or about the comics industry



Wraparound cover of NEXT MAN #2

(C) McKenzie and Argonzezzi



The Next Man
and his pal...



(C) McKenzie and Argonuzzi

VINCE: That's one solution.

ROGER: Which got me the tag of being lazy at Marvel. Maybe I ought to try a story in which the character is prying his way from between the word balloons!

VINCE: Can I mention who my favorite artist is? I think Alex Raymond is the best--and I can get away with that because he's dead. He's just the greatest. I would like to experiment with getting the amount of work out as well as he did. I think that's what Matt Wagner's doing with "Crendel," by the way. He's toying around with an Art Deco style now. Sometimes words can get in the way of that composition in the artwork, but...

ROGER: One thing I would like to talk about is Comico. In answer to your first question--"Why bring NEXT MAN to Comico?"--all I can say is that I saw six months ago, a year ago, what they were doing. It seems to me that Comico is going to be or maybe is one of the hottest companies around. Certainly ELEMENTALS is an excellent book, and from what I've heard MACROSS is sold out already.

in general?

VINCE: I think basically if comics had better foundations and weren't so caught up in cosmetic things, we'd see a lot better material. The industry is expanding now, but we really need to get together, to get organized. All the publishers got together a few months ago for lunch in New York. Big whoop. That's just semantics. What we've got to do is get everybody geared so that the industry can grow in leaps and bounds instead of a little bit at a time. That's what you need for openers. I see no reason why it can't really be, not as big as movies or television, but at least half as big--because it's a visual medium and it's fast. It's fun, you know?

DIANA: What about the fact that there are words in comic books, and fewer and fewer people are reading at all these days?

ROGER: What I've tended to do to solve that situation is not to write any words at all.



(C) McKenzie and Argonuzzi

The cover of NEXT MAN #3



...Cubit!



(C) McKenzie and Argonuzzi

VINCE: I think ELEMENTALS is probably one of the best books I've read since the old FANTASTIC FOUR. It's the old Stan Lee Jackpot.

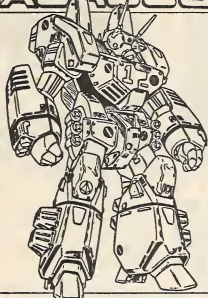
ROGER: In a way you get that same feeling at Comico that Marvel used to have.

DIANA: You mean the whole family kind of thing from Marvel's early days?

ROGER: It's hard for us to do because we're creator-owned books. It's not as if you're under one big banner like in the early days at Marvel when Stan would write every superhero book and Jack [Kirby] would draw almost every one of them. The ones he didn't draw, Steve Ditko would draw or Don Heck would draw. It's not that way here at Comico, but the attitude is the same, which is nice.

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MACROSS

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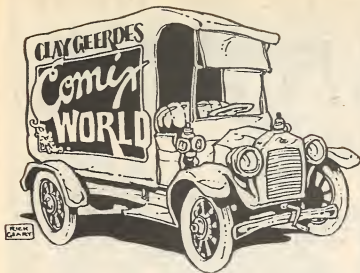
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Will Eisner's Quarterly No.5

A Life Force, Will Eisner's graphic novel, concludes in this issue. Also, the second part of an article about the early days of Eisner's comic shop, and an interview with Jack Davis. Don't miss this one!





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I knew the gore would come back, all that slime and ooze, those decaying, eviscerated cadavers with empty eye sockets, all that old rot. McCarthy and his cronies wouldn't be able to keep the coffin lids on. I knew that. Good slime always leaks back under the door when you least expect it.

I knew it would come back because we always get nostalgic for the gore of yesterday, the horror of childhood, the zombies, vampires, ghouls, giant insects, the living hands and floating heads, the brains in the jars, the androids and cyborgs, the demons and devils and witches and warlocks--who can do without all that stuff for long? At times you just get this ache in the pit of your tummy and the only thing that can satisfy it is reading an old mildewed copy of TALES FROM THE CRYPT or THE VAULT OF HORROR or--choke!--the latest TWISTED TALES.

This gross-out gore is a need like booze or nicotine or hash or diet-Pepsi, something you just have to have or you just claw the walls and chew your sheets all night.

I knew it would be back, because a generation missed it. Oh, they had superheroes and underground comix, but that wasn't the same; that wasn't the real stuff, the nitty gritty, the rats and roaches that come back, the bodies that won't stay in the swamp, the buried that won't stay dead, the vampires that look just like you and me except that they need a good shot of blood instead of a martini--no, the yuppies missed the Gaines gore, the greatest baseball game ever played, the one where the players used parts of a corpse. They missed those trips into space and the strange aliens that turned out not to be much like us humans at all; oh, they saw a lot of the same latex crapola on *Star Trek* but that wasn't the same, that bloodless, watered down horror. It was the ECs they missed, the Entertaining Comics, all that gorgeous gore leaked into the American psyche by the likes of Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein and Wally Wood and Jack Davis and Bernie Krigstein and Al Williamson. The early fifties were the time to hang out in the drugstore and get the first copies of TALES FROM THE CRYPT, SHOCK SUSPENSORIES, VAULT OF HORROR, WEIRD SCIENCE, WEIRD SCIENCE-FANTASY,

TWO-FISTED TALES--ah, just the names are enough to make us quicken our breath, look over our shoulder, check under the bed at night like that kid in *Poltergeist*. These were the real comics, the ultimate comics, the best art and the fastest moving stories, an indictment of human nature and greed and human prejudice. Here were the guys plotting to off their wives and marry their young mistresses, the women killing off their old huddies in exchange for young lovers, the downtrodden getting revenge on the well-to-do, the animals getting even with their cruel masters, the insects getting their due. After EC, there was a gap, a decade of semi-nothingness, a period so bland most people have a hard time remembering if anything happened at all.

Then came the sixties and suddenly CREEPY and EERIE and VAMPIRELLA began to fill the gap, and many of the kids who had been about eight years old when the vein was cut at EC, those kids began to draw and what they wanted to draw was what they had seen as kids, what had suddenly disappeared from the newsstands--they wanted those monsters back and it wasn't long before Mort Leav's THE HEAP was everywhere. He was the Incredible Hulk; he was the Swamp Thing; he was Man-Thing. Monsters were on the loose again, on the prowl, and while they were content with rather mundane stranglings and mutilations in the overground comics, they let it all hang out in the undergrounds, committing unspeakable sexual crimes. The theme of an issue of SKULL COMIX was The Ghoul Gets the Girl. In the lead story, Richard Corben did it to an early Kurtzman story, "HooHah!" Corben called it "Humble Harve's House." It had the usual horror story beginning where a young couple are driving along in the country, get caught in a rainstorm, and seek help at an old house, but from there on it was strictly rocky horror with all the stops pulled out. Roger Brand took off from an old science fiction story, *Danovan's Brain*, when he did "The Floating Head" in his REAL PULP COMICS and TALES OF SEX AND DEATH. Edgar Allan Poe, a frequent influence on EC, was revived along with H.P. Lovecraft and the parade of monsters and ghouls was on again.

So I knew when the ECs died, when CREEPY and EERIE came and went, when the underground comix rose and fell, that it would not be long before the gore would be back, that women would be in jeopardy again, that revenge was forthcoming, that poetic justice was not dead, that the evil would get their due; problem was, it often didn't turn out that way in TWISTED TALES and ALIEN WORLDS. Somehow, there had been a shift in the psyche. There were too many unsympathetic characters in the stories, people you didn't care about, people who were no better than the people they worked for or against--so who cared if they got theirs or not? Everyone seemed to get it in TWISTED TALES, not just the bad guys. There was an amorality at work, one that contrasted strongly with the moral position always taken by EC. Ultra-violence was in. Take "Head of the Class." A boy gets his finger ripped off and another one gets his arm torn out of the socket and still a third has his head torn off and put on the mantle. Children turn out to be robots and the one real child is killed and has his head torn off. A lot of blood and gore. No moral.

EC always implied sex, but rarely showed anything more than sexy women in scanty bathing suits. Pacific Comics' new horror line (now published by Eclipse) was frequently sexual and the sexual behavior was explicit. Well, any comic, in order to be truly rebellious, must violate all the going taboos, the "isms" of the day, and one would expect to find such a comic labelled sexist, racist, ageist, childist; after all,

the rebel artist does not sit and ask himself if he can draw this or that picture or whether this will be considered sexist or that ageist or that racist, he just does the story and lets the ink dry where it may. Every reader has to deal with the story on his own level. So a few issues of TWISTED TALES and more than one issue of EPIC brought outraged mothers into the comic stores to question whether or not these comics should be sold to children.

All of which led to some asking if we were going to undergo another revival of Werthamism, but it was mostly ho-hum. There were no major moves by PTAs this time, no suppressive attacks on comics in the paper and magazines, actually no Fred Wertham on the lecture circuit to fan the flames. I laughed when I first heard the thought. When I see whole families sitting and watching Stephen King films, well, the neo-EC horror comics just pale by comparison. Via TV, kids are accustomed to gore and violence rates far beyond those I grew up with and, well, what can I tell you? When I was a kid, Lon Chaney scared me under the seat as the Wolf Man; now I just take him and Frankenstein and Dracula for granted, expecting them to be played by new actors every few years, drawn by new artists.

The comic book is a wish-fulfillment fantasy and a continuing manifestation of the repetition compulsion. We have seen the same stuff over and over and this month's issue isn't really much different than the last's, but come Friday we'll be in the store buying it anyway. Collecting and reading horror comics relate to the inner psyche, to the secret self, to the latent killer, avenger, revenger, warrior, dictator, exhibitionist, voyeur; they do not relate to the electrician, the delivery boy, the waitress. In the comic world, we can see, be, and do everything. Our bodies are perfect and we have machines that can work magic. The popularity of the horror or crime comic lies in its twofold nature for the reader. We get to have our cake and eat it, too. We commit the crime, solve it through the detective, catch ourselves, and even kill ourselves or commit suicide, yet we go on living our mundane lives at the office as though none of it happened.

Folks interested in newwave comics should drop a line to Clay Geerdes, Box 7081, Berkeley, CA 94707. Clay publishes COMIX WAVE MAGAZINE, BAD GIRL ART, and THE VAULT OF HUMOR.

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Name: Peter Rasputin
Alias: Colossus of THE UNCANNY X-MEN
Favorite Magazines: SOVIET LIFE and HEAVY METAL
Favorite Baseball Team: The Cincinnati Reds
Favorite Song: "Magnet & Steel"
Favorite Movie Performance: The Tin Man in THE WIZARD OF OZ

Name: Mephisto
Alias: Satan, Beelzebub, that red guy with the horns and pitchfork
Favorite Food: Deviled eggs
Least Favorite Food: Angel food cake
Favorite Rock Group: Styx
Favorite Songs: "Highway to Hell," "Fire"
Lucky Number: 666

Name: Henry Pym
Alias: Yellowjacket
Favorite Performer: Sting
Favorite TV Show: SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE (only if "The Bees" did a skit)
Favorite Movie: THE SWARM
Favorite Morning Cereal: Honeycombs
Name: The Watcher
Favorite Song: "All by Myself"
Favorite Album: Pink Floyd's "Dark Side of the Moon"
Favorite Food: Campbell's Soup for One
Presidential Preference: John Glenn (he knows him personally)

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3. ZOT!
4. NEXUS
5. JON SABLE, FREELANCE
6. GRIMJACK
7. MYTHADVENTURES
8. JUDGE DREDD
9. ELEMENTALS
10. THE NEW MUTANTS

BEST WRITER: Alan Moore
BEST ARTIST: Bill Sienkiewicz
BEST NEW ARTISTS: Mike Mignola and Terry Shoemaker
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ALL IN COLOR FOR A BUCK-&-A-HALF COLUMN OF CRITICISM & REVIEW

2000 A.D. MONTHLY #2

A few columns back, I wrote on the subject of structure in comic book humor. It's my opinion that coherent storylines and solid characterization are essential to creating a consistently funny story, rather than merely stringing one joke after another.

A perfect example of how well a structured humor story can work is Alan Moore's installment of "D.R. and Quinch" in 2000 A.D. MONTHLY #2. Here, the humor comes from his giving the characters very definite personalities and then making circumstances force the individuals to step out of character one by one.

Black-hearted D.R. has unaccountably fallen in love with a gentle girl named Chrysoptasia. The emotion affects him to the extent that he renounces his former world-destroying ways and seems determined to lead a perfectly mundane life with the girl of his dreams. This places D.R.'s loyal stooge Quinch into D.R.'s usual position of devious mastermind, as Quinch tries to break up the couple at any cost. Quinch's plot is not of D.R.'s caliber, however, and leads to a third character reversal which puts a hilarious capper on this issue's installment. The overriding feeling of characters out of sync is maintained throughout the story by the interesting device of having the usually mute Quinch narrate the entire thing.

Alan Davis' art is as character-oriented as Moore's script, often giving an added twist of hysteria to Quinch's ludicrously calm narrative tone. Moore writes with the same sort of detail to character that he exhibited in the slightly looser humor strip "The Bojefries Saga" (WARRIOR magazine), this time focusing on friendships rather than family relationships. Beneath all the fun of "D.R. and Quinch" one finds a touch of reality. Old pals do grow up, settle down, and grow out of touch. The way in which this story deals with it is an excellent example of how such potentially sad circumstances can be shifted ever so slightly into the realm of the absurd.

The other features in this book are fairly well done, also. Old Judge Oredd mixes it up with an army of mutant spiders, resulting in a lot of black-humored annihilation. The third feature is "Strontium Dog," concerning a mutant interplanetary bounty hunter who lets us know what would happen if Clint Eastwood and Jonah Hex were merged and then denied a morning cup of coffee. They suffer mainly in comparison with "D.R. and Quinch," since adventure strips, even competently written ones, are far less rare than well-crafted comedy.

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS #1 and #2

Since this is extremely relevant to the matter at hand, I'd like to open this review by talking about the casual comic book reader.

A lot of fans don't think the casual comic book reader is necessary to the comics industry. I read in various fanzines how the fan market is becoming more and more important to the industry, and there's an awful lot of back-patting going around. I agree that it's good that there is an organized group of serious comic book readers, and the comic stores are an essential service to these fans by putting such a wide variety of material in one place.

But if the fan market is the *only* market, then the comics are *dead*. Period. I don't think I'm being too out of line in saying this. Given that the San Francisco area has a population of roughly 700,000, it's a safe bet to say that you could fit the *entire* comics fandom population in this vicinity with plenty of room to spare, and there would be very little need to even *stock* comics in the rest of California, let alone other states. I'm being unnecessarily favorable to the fan market, too, since most estimates would put the actual direct market population at a fraction of the above. Although the specialty stores have proven to be a good influence on the market, they are very thinly spread.

The comic book companies understand this, which is why they sometimes don't pay as much attention to the fans as some fans think they should. The companies are greatly interested in bringing in the vast untapped potential readership out there, and they generally don't mind stepping on a few fan toes if it'll get the sales figures up a little more.

I remember twenty years ago that *everybody* bought comics. Every kid I visited had a huge stack in a dresser or closet. This huge readership was composed of *casual* readers, though. The comics were generally bought for interesting covers or strange story premises. If a kid bought two consecutive issues of the same title, it was virtually by accident.

Though television, video games and such get a great deal of blame for the current relative disinterest, the problem could have a lot to do with the fact that it's virtually impossible to read comics in the random way my friends and I did twenty years ago. Every book you buy has only part of a story, and even that much is generally intricately hooked up to all sorts of previous "history" with the result that you either become a fan and *can't miss a book*, or spend your money on toy planes.

My personal preference in continuity is generally that of Carl Barks, who was working with characters that were defined by more than costume or powers. He could consistently set his ducks down at square one regarding job, surroundings, and purpose, and the reader would never feel vague about the characters themselves. Continuity could play a part, as in UNCLE SCROOGE #41, "The Status Seeker." In the course of that story, the Beagle Boys off-handedly mention events that had taken place ten issues earlier

in "All at Sea." The continuity was enough to touch the story, but not enough to require the earlier issue. This was obviously before anybody knew that people were saving back issues.

Today, continuity is such a major force in comic books that the mere hint of changes is enough to inspire a flight toward the racks. The past few years have seen drastic changes in books, mainly from the larger publishers who have the more settled characters. These moves have been enough to inspire Marvel's game of bloody musical chairs known as THE SECRET WARS and have changed a DC project originally devised to chart the history of that company's characters into one calculated to alter virtually everything now coming from them. Yes, we've finally gotten to CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS.

What a can't-miss idea it must have seemed! The fans would pour their money down for it because of the number of important events going on, and at the same time the company could spend the year amputating the complete back-issue file from the books to come! Carl Barks never had so much trouble getting back to square one.

The story, down to the title, reminds me a little of an old THOR serial about "Infinity," which was a giant hand that was constantly reaching out and grabbing planets while we mere mortals could only stand and watch as the hand grew bigger and bigger in the sky. *Something* is moving steadily from planet to planet of the DC Universe, and it looks like any number of obscure or unprofitable heroes will fall before its unyielding continuity.

I'm sure that this series will get a great deal of praise from fans if only because it's so much better written and drawn than THE SECRET WARS. Marv Wolfman, George Perez, and Dick Giordano have done a generally fine job so far. This *can't* be taken for granted, given that SECRET WARS sold like fishcakes despite the generally mediocre level of quality within it. CRISIS reflects craftsmanship and good ability on the part of both writer and artists to make a group of superheroes look and sound like more

than a group of muscles in different costumes. Although I know that they generally give Oscars for death scenes, I hope readers will note the nice scenes of humor Wolfman tosses into the series, such as the Anthro bit in #2. These scenes are not only amusing but move the plot along.

But the writing and art, we might as well admit, are in the end incidental to the main job of continuity alteration. With that in mind, I have two comments:

(1) One consistent problem with continuity buffs is that they have to work *every* story into this already complicated pattern. This was brought home to me when I mentioned the book to a rather well-known comic book critic who admitted that the destruction of Earth-3 in #1 had startled her not so much for the destruction but because she'd never heard of Earth-3. She'd researched hundreds of comics, but it was easy enough for that handful of stories to slip by. In essence, Earth-3 *already* was in limbo. They rescued it from the abyss only so that they could hurl it back in. Oh well, at least it made good kindling.

(2) Incredibly, the aspects of continuity most drastically affected are the ones that should be touched the least. In THE SECRET WARS the most drastic changes hit those characters that casual readers would be most likely to know if they bought a stray issue. In CRISIS, rumors are flying that the new Superman will be the child of Lex Luthor and Lois Lane of Earth-3. The highly familiar scene of the baby leaving the doomed planet in #1 seems to affirm this, though it's still anybody's ball game.

Can you *imagine* it, though? Ask anybody on the street and they'll tell you Superman came from Krypton. Maybe in real life it's some sort of gas, but there's a nice little '30s science fiction fan sound to it. "Earth-3" sounds like a shopping mall movie theatre. No new reader on earth who's seen all the various Superman movies or so forth is going to know beans about Earth-3 if he decides to try out the comic book version. I hope it's only a rumor. So does Supergirl.

CRISIS ON INFINITE EARTHS is the comic book industry's version of what the French film industry used to call the "Tradition of Quality" film. Every year they'd get a famous writer, a famous director, a famous composer, famous actors and actresses, etc., to make a film version of a famous French novel. The result was a monolith of a movie that impressed by size and cost rather than personal expression. The CRISIS team has done a little better at keeping a few personal touches in the book, but ultimately we're dealing with a monolith of a series that complicates far more than it simplifies and attempts to push the stories of hundreds of different writers into a single "coherent" framework. For any quality to emerge from this at all is more than one can expect, and the need for the industry to provide such lavish extravaganzas seems a little nervous.

Since the book *is* one of the most eagerly discussed coming out this year, though, I'll give it another look some time before it ends its run.

-- ERIC YARBER

AXEL PRESSBUTTON #1

Independent publishers, when given the opportunity, will sometimes publish almost anything that makes money. Such is the case with PRESSBUTTON. I had come to expect better from Eclipse. One might expect this tripe from Eagle or Americomics, but not from Eclipse. Publishers have to make concessions



CRISIS' "Harbinger,"
designed by George Perez

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Mysta Mystralis, the Laser Eraser, with Axel Pressbutton

with violence to satisfy the bloodthirsty fan--that goes without saying. However, Eclipse has always been quixotic in their attempts to maintain integrity within the product. Sure, SABRE is one comic with an excess of violence but there is a quality story somewhere among the fight scenes. Besides, the hero looks strikingly like Jimi Hendrix and is a rebel to boot. We can sympathize with Sabre. I find it hard to sympathize with a main character who has a cleaver for a hand and a penchant for maiming and killing.

PRESSBUTTON #1 has a grim plot. Humorless characters cavort through 32 pages of nonstop chase, hack and slash scenes. When Mysta Mystralis, better known as Laser Eraser, isn't wiping someone out of existence alongside Pressbutton, she's taking off her clothes. Even the one attempt to breathe humor into the characters doesn't work at all well: As they leave a building, Pressbutton goes berserk when passing a row of decorative plants. He starts slashing at them until Laser Eraser brings him back to reality.

Steve Dillon is very capable of producing action figures. He has a good range of facial expressions and could very well be an above average artist. He needs to work on proportion--something that eludes a lot of promising artists.

I must mention the back-up story, "Zirk, Silver Sweater of the Spaceways." Zirk is kind of a perverted alien spacepig who sweats avocado puree and has a perverted desire to watch human females...*thrash!* He is featured as a minor character in the main story almost as an afterthought, for laughs. But he shines in his own story--a reprint from a British magazine called WARRIOR.

I hope this series isn't a

turning point for Eclipse. I've always liked their offbeat comics and can only hope that PRESSBUTTON is a fluke.

-- WENDI LEE

ROM #65 and ROCKET RACCOON #1

Comics change too much. I'm not talking about new concepts or storylines; I'm talking about what an average comic book is quantitatively. A comic has two fairly standard dimensions: width and height. A comic varies in thickness, the stock of the paper, and the printing process--and all of this is reflected in the price. So show me an average comic.

Marvel's ROM #65 by Mantlo, Ditko, and Leialoha is a 65¢ comic. It is 22 pages long and printed on plain old newsprint. This format is fast going the way of the dinosaur as more and more discriminating fans buy more slickly-packaged comics printed on papers with proper names like Mando and Baxter. ROM #65 is a beautiful dinosaur, though. This issue is anti-climactic both in the fact that it's only the mopping up after the Wraith war and in that Craig Russell has finished his much hyped stint as inker. Well, Steve Leialoha walks right in and does an incredible job on ROM #65, and Marvel's busy promoting his inks on Secret Borez II--there's no justice! ROM features Steve Ditko's fantastic pencils, Steve Leialoha's straight ahead inking which does not obscure Ditko's contribution, and a normal, non-fluorescent color process. And it is much better than the average comic.

The next step above the 65¢ dinosaur at Marvel is the 75¢ limited series on Mando paper. ROCKET RACCOON #1 by Mantlo, Mignola, and Gordon has the misfortune of wearing the new high tech, experimental, and still unsuccessful Flexographic printing process. The problem with this process is that not only do the colors overpower your eyes, but they overpower the artwork by making inked lines and spaces appear blurry or broken. I'm sure Mignola is discouraged by this because as a newcomer he's made a fine offering in ROCKET #1 only to have it obscured by the printing process. Gordon's inks look sharp where not obscured by the blinding colors, and Mantlo's whole concept reminds me a little of one of my favorite books, ZOT!. I think Marvel may be able to salvage the Flexographic printing process for something, but not until the bugs are worked out, hopefully.

-- TOM HAUNERT



ROCKET RACCOON, an unfortunate victim of the Flexographic printing process?

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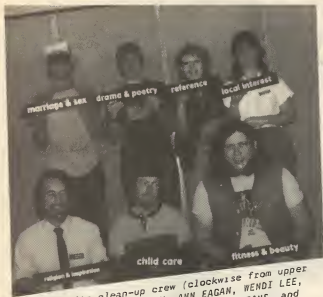
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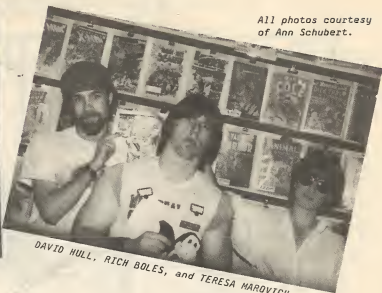
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Palo Alto clean-up crew (clockwise from upper left): ROBERT BRADLEY, ANN EAGAN, WENDI LEE, TERESA MAROVICH, DICK SWAN, JOHN NEANS, and JOHN BARRETT.



DAVID HULL, RICH BOLES, and TERESA MAROVICH

All photos courtesy of Ann Schubert.

April will see a few changes for Comics & Comix. Our logo now includes other products sold in our seven stores. Hence the name: Comics & Comix, Toys & Games!

The Palo Alto store is moving to a bigger, busier location. There'll be more room for you to browse through a larger selection of comics, games, and toys. Come visit us at 405 California Avenue, just off El Camino Real.

The staff is friendly and knowledgeable. We have quite a range of specialties among them. Teresa Marovich has managed this store for the past three years. When she was hired eight years ago, Teresa knew very little about comics. Today she collects off-beat comics and romances.

As manager, Teresa's goal is to make the store a family place. She wants everyone to feel comfortable when they come through the door. "Business is getting better and better because people walk in and they know it's a fun place," she says. Teresa's easygoing, affable manner attracts an array of steady customers.

The oldest employee--no, no, I'm not talking age here--is Chip Rich. He's worked for CMC going on 10 years. Aside from being our resident family therapist (yes, the degree is real!), he's also our old comics buyer.

If Chip isn't around, talk to Tom Kee about old and new comics. He's quite knowledgeable about games, too. Tom works closely with Dick Swan, CMC's Senior Purchaser.

Ask Ann Schubert about Japanese animation, comics, or robots. She's been studying and collecting for 12 years! Ann is also our resident photographer.

Rich Boles is a self-proclaimed know-it-all! He's worked here for three years and knows a little bit about everything.

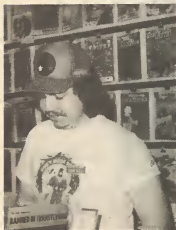
David Hull came on board in January. He's learned a lot about Japanese animation from Ann. There's also a lot of knowledge about games and SF in that boy!

That's the crew with the exception of yours truly. I joined the company through the WIRE a few months ago. I specialize in General Mayhem...and current comic trends!

We've been very lucky to find such an assortment of employees. In the next TELEGRAPH WIRE, I'll be spotlighting another store. Be seeing you.



Old comics experts CHIP RICH (above) and TOM KEE (below).



ANN SCHUBERT



WENDI LEE

-- WENDI LEE

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